



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE METHODS OF REFORMATION INTERPRETERS OF THE BIBLE

PRESERVED SMITH, PH.D.
Amherst College, Amherst, Mass.

The prevalent idea that the Reformation was, above all things, a change in men's attitude toward the Bible, is, like most popular conceptions, roughly correct. Stated too broadly, indeed, the proposition, recently made by a historian of German literature, that "Luther substituted bibliolatry for ecclesiolatry," becomes a caricature of the exact truth. Nevertheless it is indisputable that one very important aspect of the Lutheran revolt is the change in the way in which the Reformers regarded Holy Scripture and in their methods of interpretation.

For five hundred years before that time the schoolmen had been busy weaving around the letter of the Bible a mass of exegesis which has never been equaled for ignorant complexity and barren ingenuity. Entirely destitute of historic imagination or information, even of the necessary grammatical and linguistic knowledge, they twisted the text into a large variety of allegorical meanings. Nicholas de Lyra, one of the most sensible of them, thought that each word should be expounded in four several senses: the literal, the moral, the allegoric, and the anagogic.¹

A new point of view was bound to come with the revival of the enthusiasm for the classics and especially for Greek. The scholars of the Renaissance recoiled in horror from the barren subtleties of the scholastics, whom they ridiculed in every possible way. One of the first to apply the new learning to the exegesis of Scripture was Lorenzo Valla, an original and acute but by no means reverent scholar of the early fifteenth century. His chief delight was to point out the absurdities of the monkish theologians. Having

¹ "*Littera gesta docet, quod credas allegoria,
Moralis quod agas, quo tendis anagogia.*"

given a hard blow to the temporal power of the papacy in exposing the *Donation of Constantine* as a forgery, he determined to do the same for the current theology by pointing out the numerous inaccuracies in the Latin Vulgate, then always considered, as it was later officially declared to be, the authentic form of the Scriptures. With three Greek and three Latin manuscripts in hand, Valla easily showed how many mistakes had been made by the translators² and demonstrated, to his own satisfaction at least, that they knew neither Greek nor good Latin, nor history, nor even theology. In many points he corrected both the readings and the style of the work.

Valla's *Notes* were in advance of the time, and remained for many years almost unnoticed, until they came into the hands of a greater scholar, Desiderius Erasmus, the precursor of the Reformation. Erasmus found the manuscript in the Abbey of Parc, near Louvain, and thought it so much superior to Lyra and the old interpreters, that, though not without some qualms on account of the bad reputation of the author for impiety, he at once edited it (1505). It may have been this work that turned his attention to the need of a fresh translation of the New Testament, or it may have been the influence of his friend Colet, an eager student of the Bible, that decided him to perform this task. He completed it during the year he spent in England (1505-6), but laid aside the work during his visit to Italy. After his return (1509) he endeavored to get the work published, but was discouraged by a high ecclesiastic, and it was not until 1519, when he brought out a second edition of the New Testament, that he ventured to insert his own version.³ In the first edition, 1516, he used a translation differing but slightly from the Vulgate, and made his very substantial corrections and suggestions in the *Notes* (*Annotationes*) which were published, not, as later, at the foot of the text, but in a separate volume.

The appearance of the *Novum instrumentum*, as Erasmus called it, in March, 1516, marks an era in the interpretation of the Bible.

² Jerome merely revised a previous version.

³ J. Bludau, *Die beiden ersten Erasmus-Ausgaben des Neuen Testaments* (1902); P. S. Allen, *Opus Epistolarum Erasmi* (Oxford, 1906 ff.), II, 164 ff.; 181 ff. I have used, in the British Museum, all the early editions of the Greek Testament.

The immense stimulus which it gave is evinced not only by the many sharp attacks made on the editor by the conservatives, but by the immediate change it caused in the methods of the reformers. In the cases of Luther, Zwingli, Carlstadt, and others, we can mark the exact point at which they made the acquaintance of the new edition, and note its powerful operation on their minds. The text has, indeed, been much improved by the labors of Westcott, Tischendorf, and a host of other critics, and Erasmus has been criticized for having used few and poor manuscripts, and for certain errors. The best codex he had, that lent him by Reuchlin, was not older than the twelfth century, though he himself thought that it dated from the Apostolic Age. But while in many details he was at fault, he must be given the high praise of having been the first who actually tried, on any scientific principles whatever, to restore the primitive text. He not only collated authorities, but corrected them by his very wide reading in the early Fathers, and with the help of Oecolampadius by comparing the citations from the Old Testament with the original Hebrew. He even ventured to infer some corruptions when authorities agreed, and some of his conjectural emendations are excellent. Moreover he was fearless in carrying out his convictions. He honestly noted that the passage about the woman taken in adultery (John 7:53—8:11) and the last verses of Mark (16:9—20) are lacking in the best authorities; and, finding that the statement about the heavenly witnesses (I John 5:7) was not included in any of his codices, he omitted it. For this step he was violently attacked on many sides, and finally restored the verse in the third edition (1522) on being shown that one Greek manuscript did contain it.

Though his textual criticism is the most abiding portion of his work, to contemporaries his translation and notes proved the most stimulating. How far from the old scholastic spiderwebs are his short, pointed comments! One or two examples may be given. The Vulgate translated *μετανοεῖτε* (Matt. 3:2) "penitentiam agite," which, owing to the peculiarity of Latin in having only one word for penance and penitence, might mean either "Repent ye," or "Do penance," and was taken in the latter sense by the majority of ecclesiastics. Erasmus translates "Resipiscite," and gives

a concise but sufficient explanation of the true force of the Greek word. Luther said that this was what first taught him the meaning of repentance. He embodied the thought in the first of his *Ninety-five Theses*, and more fully in his *Resolutions* (1518), and in his German translation rendered the words, "Bessert euch." Again, in a note to John 1:1, Erasmus explains the meaning of λόγος, which he prefers to render *sermo* and not, as the Vulgate, *verbum*. Commenting on Rom. 1:17 ("The just shall live by his faith") Erasmus observes that Jerome, in Habakkuk, read: "The just shall live by my faith," but disagrees with him, and finds the Pauline thought in the traditional text.

Erasmus' criticisms were, however, far from being purely grammatical. Many a trenchant word is spoken against the "new Judaism," or formalism, and against ecclesiastical abuses. The words of Jesus and Paul on fasting, and that favorite passage of the monks, that some have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake, furnish him with texts for sermons against the evils within the church. He endeavors also to give some introduction to the epistles, summing up their arguments, and discussing the canonicity of doubtful books. The ideas which are merely sketched in the notes were later expanded in the *Paraphrases* to every book of the New Testament except Revelation. These enjoyed so high a reputation that, in 1547, an order was given that they be placed, along with the English Bible, in every church in England.

Important as it was, Erasmus' work never attained the scope and power of that of his contemporary, Martin Luther, in this as in most things at once the leader and the exponent of his age. The story is well known of his finding the Bible during his last student days at Erfurt (1505) and reading it until the lecture bell called him away. During the next seven years in the monastery he read it a good deal, but it was not until he began to lecture on it in 1512 that a strict and fruitful study of it began. He first took up some of the Psalms, selecting those which appealed to him most strongly on emotional grounds. His lectures, fortunately preserved, show that he used for his text and as an authority the recent edition by the French humanist reformer Le Fèvre d'Étaples. The old scho-

lastic interpreters also had some influence with him, but his paramount authority is St. Augustine. The lectures are permeated with the subjective element; the teacher, having just come through a period of anguish and doubt, is trying to give others the light and help he has attained. But withal he is somewhat timid; the old forms are followed a bit stiffly.

It was in his lectures on the Epistle to the Romans, which he next gave (1515-16), that he really found himself.⁴ This great human document, of incalculable importance to the student of Luther's development and theology, is interesting for our present purpose as illustrating his exegetical methods. For the first part of the course he again follows Le Fèvre, but when he reached the ninth chapter, Erasmus' New Testament came out and at once took the leading place among his authorities. Not that he follows his predecessors blindly, for he shows great independence and critical acumen. The work is, from a scientific standpoint, a valuable contribution to the study of Paul's thought. There is, it is true, a relic of mediaevalism in the form, especially in the variety of interpretations given to the same word, and in the occasional use of allegory, but through it shines the modern spirit, the mind instinct with Paul's message, and anxious to impress it on the world. Sufficient attention is given to grammar, but the main thing is the thought, "the kernel of the nut and the marrow of the bones." The lecturer asked himself first what Paul said to his own contemporaries; but secondly, and this was more important, what had Paul to say to the sixteenth century? The lectures are full of allusions, and very free ones, to the great men of the time, and many a sharp word against indulgences, fasting, pilgrimages, and spiritual wickedness in high places remind the reader that Luther was already a reformer. His manner of lecturing was exemplary; he sought in every way in his power, by anecdote, by illustration, by careful summing up, and apt translation,⁵ to impress the meaning on his hearers.

The central idea of the Epistle was, to him, justification by

⁴ This work, long supposed to be lost, was "found" recently in the show cases of the Berlin Royal Library, and was edited with exemplary care by Dr. J. Ficker, in 1908. I have had the privilege of reading a portion of it in the original manuscript.

⁵ "*Tapfere Verdeutschung*." The lectures were, of course, given in Latin.

faith, in connection with which he expounded his other fundamental doctrines, resting on Paul; those, namely, of predestination and election, of the difference between the law and the Gospel, and of the necessity of continual repentance, for "we are partly sinners, partly just, nothing if not penitent, for repentance is the mean between unrighteousness and justification." Throughout the whole we can still follow the struggles in his own soul, the trace of doubt about his own salvation, and his usually firm faith. Above all we see that while the scientific side of the exegesis is by no means slighted, it is the practical and moral which is of real weight.

Luther continued lecturing on the Bible throughout life. His commentaries, interesting and important as they are, need not detain us further, for they do not contain his best work in the interpretation of the Bible. This is found in his translation. He put his whole heart into this, for he longed to do something for the whole people. He expressed this desire in a little-known letter of 1520.⁶ "I am writing a verbose commentary on the Psalms," he says, "and have begun to repent of doing so, for such work is the food of the perfect, and does not appeal to the common people nor capture many souls." On the quiet Wartburg, therefore, he began work on the German Bible, which for more than twenty years was his constant occupation. The New Testament was published in September, 1522, with an introduction to the whole work and introductions to the various books, by Luther; and a description of the Holy Land, by Melancthon. Work on the Old Testament was begun at once; the version being published in parts, the last of them in 1532. A revision was undertaken a little later, to which the Reformer devoted much of his best thought till his death.

Though in point of scholarship Luther's version was far superior to those of his predecessors, of which there were several, yet a rigid examination of his principles shows that they were not truly scientific, but were warped by apologetic considerations. In the protocols for the revision he laid down the rule that when a sentence in the Old Testament did not agree with the New Testament, the vowel points should be changed, regardless of authority, with

⁶ To Gerard Lystrius, July 30. First published by Rogge, in *Archief voor Nederlandsch Kerkgeschiedenis*, VII, ii, 204 (1898).

the object of making the sense conform to the New Testament, and when a sentence was found not susceptible of this treatment, and repugnant to the rest of Scripture, that it should be eliminated as a rabbinical insertion. How far Luther really acted on these principles I have been unable to determine, but some of his alterations astonished his learned colleagues, who, as Luther naïvely remarks, "were sometimes so surprised that they said they never would have thought of that their whole life long."

The translation of the New Testament also suffered by an attempt to make it exegetical, the extreme instance being the insertion of the word "alone" to bring out the Pauline thought in Rom. 3:28 ("We therefore conclude that a man is justified by faith [alone]"). The Reformer was sharply criticized for this and defended himself in a rather angry *Letter on Translation*. "It is my New Testament and my version," he burst out, "and I will not let the papists judge it. If the word 'alone' is not found in the Latin and Greek, yet the passage has that meaning and must be so rendered to make it clear and strong in German."

Much of Luther's best thought on the Bible is contained in his introductions. The most striking quality of his criticism is its freedom—the more remarkable because of his insistence, in the book *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, in the *Unfree Will*, and elsewhere, that the whole of Scripture is plenarily inspired, is inerrant, and is consistent. Against Erasmus especially he makes the point that where all is dictated by the Holy Spirit there can be no contradiction and no doubt whatever. Again in 1530 he says: "Let no one think that he can master the faith by reason. . . . What Christ says must be true, whether I or any other man can understand it." But surely no man with so high an opinion of the Bible as a whole ever criticized the different parts with such trenchant discrimination. "Romans," he says, "is the true kernel of the New Testament, the clearest of all gospels, worthy that a Christian man should not only learn the words by heart but converse with them daily as food for the soul." Revelation he thinks neither apostolic nor prophetic for it does not teach Christ. The Books of Kings are a hundred thousand paces ahead of Chronicles and more to be believed. It would be better if the Book of

Esther had never been written. Ecclesiastes rides in neither boots nor spurs but stumbles along in socks, "as I did when I was in the the cloister." The Epistle of James, as is well known, was especially uncongenial to him. In the Preface to the edition of 1522 he states that he considers it a good book, though not apostolic, for it contradicts Paul's doctrine of faith and works. But in the Preface to the New Testament of 1545, after commending the Gospel and First Epistle of John, the Epistles of Paul, and the First Epistle of Peter, he says that compared to them the Epistle of James is a letter of straw. Even this is much milder than the things he said about it in his *Table Talk*:

Many sweat to reconcile St. Paul and St. James, as does Melanchthon in his *Apology*, but in vain. "Faith justifies" and "faith does not justify" contradict each other flatly. If any one can harmonize them I will give him my doctor's hood and let him call me a fool.

Let us banish this Epistle from the university for it is worthless. It has no syllable about Christ, not even naming him except once at the beginning. I think it was written by a Jew who had heard of the Christians but not joined them. He had learned that the Christians insisted strongly on faith in Christ, and so he said to himself: "Well, you must take issue with them and speak only of works," and so he does. He says not a word of the passion and resurrection of Christ, the text of all the other apostles. Moreover he has no order nor method. He speaks now of clothes, now of wrath, jumping from one topic to another. He has this simile: "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also." Mary, mother of God! He compares faith to the body when it should rather be compared to the soul! The ancients saw all this and did not consider the epistle canonical.⁷

Luther's marginal notes in one of his own Bibles are equally strong.⁸ To Jas. 1:6 ("But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering") he remarks: "That is the only good place in the whole epistle." On 1:21 ("Receive with meekness the engrafted word") he writes: "Others engrafted it, not this James." Over against 2:24 ("Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, not by faith only") he dares to put: "That is false."

⁷ E. Kroker, *Luthers Tischreden in der mathesischen Sammlung* (Leipzig, 1903). Carlstadt (see his life by H. Barge, 1905, Vol. I, p. 197) says that Luther considered the Epistle of James a forgery of St. Jerome. This is groundless and contradictory to Luther's own words.

⁸ Published by Walch, *Luther's Werke* (Halle, 1742), IX, 1774 ff.

Melanchthon, the young disciple whom Luther loved, was, in his exegesis as in other things, the systematizer of his greater friend's original thought. He first began lecturing on the Bible in 1519, and with such success that the older man thought it was the best course given in a thousand years. In the *Loci Communes*, in the *De ecclesia*, and elsewhere, Melanchthon expressed the Protestant doctrine of the infallibility of Scripture. Being more logical than Luther he was therefore unable to pick and choose passages and books. In fact as well as in theory he placed the truth of Scripture above reason, saying, in his *Commentary on Colossians*, that spiritual things can only be understood by the direct help of the Spirit. His principles of interpretation were laid down by himself in the often quoted sentence: "The theologian must be first a grammarian, then a logician, and finally a witness." In his exegetical work, however, grammar takes a very subordinate place, the greater part being devoted to elucidation of the substance, including the antiquities, the philosophy, and the theology, and last but not least the practical moral application. Melanchthon saw that a proper linguistic equipment, though essential to the understanding of the text, was only a means to an end, worthless in itself.

While these two famous friends were lecturing at Wittenberg a separate reform movement was growing up in Switzerland. So conscious was its leader, Ulrich Zwingli, of the independence of his calling that he purposely abstained from reading the works of Luther lest it might be said that he had borrowed something from him. He had no such feeling about the idol of his youth, Erasmus, from whom he took many of his ideas. The copy of the New Testament of 1516 which he bought and annotated with his own hand shows that to him, as to other earnest men, its publication was an epoch-making event. Besides these notes he has left some exegetical works. To him also the Bible was the supreme book, to be preferred especially to ecclesiastical tradition. Yet he probably had more aloofness in his view of it than had his contemporaries, at least he was less under the dominion of single texts. The best example of this is his exegesis of the words: "This is my body," (Matt. 26:26), which, in opposition to Luther, he took figuratively.

The German judged reason by the Bible; the Swiss explained the Bible by reason; Zwingli proved that it was impossible that Christ's body could be in the bread and therefore that the text must mean something else; Luther pointed to the text, and said that it must be literally true whether comprehensible or not.

Zwingli's theology emphasized natural religion; that of his compatriot Calvin, revelation. Calvin was the real founder of the extreme doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. His cold logic gathered up the great thoughts of the Wittenberg Reformer, and, even more than Melancthon, molded them into a rigid system. Seeing the implication of their words, he first made the infallibility of the Bible the cornerstone of the whole system. The Word, he once said, flowed from the mouth of God himself (*ab ipsissimo Dei ore*). Though the *Institutes* has eclipsed the fame of his other writings, his exegetical work, comprising commentaries on almost every book of the Bible, is hardly less important in the history of Protestantism. These commentaries, in their historical and literary insight, and especially in their psychological understanding of the writer's personality, are the ripest fruit of early Protestant interpretation. Falling short of Luther in originality, and in that intense personal interest with which the older man invested all his work, Calvin surpasses him in the peculiar qualities of the great commentator. In bringing out the whole meaning of the text from the philological, the historical, and the practically edifying points of view, he is unrivaled.

Though much of interest might be gathered from the extant commentaries of lesser men, of Colet, or Le Fèvre, or Lang, or Carlstadt, or Schwenckfeld, the work of the five Reformers just reviewed may stand as typical of the tendencies and methods of their age. In the particular field of biblical exegesis, as in so much of subsequent thought, the seeds of the distinctively modern were sowed in the sixteenth century: The scholars of that age freed themselves from the intolerable indirectness of the schoolmen, and began to pay attention to the exact, literal meaning of the Bible. They first felt the need of a scholarly basis for interpretation, and first supplied it. The Reformers were the forerunners of the modern historical school. The mediaeval ecclesiastics had felt no difficulty

in making the Virgin Mary a nun and supplying Abraham with a knowledge of Aristotle. Erasmus and Melanchthon *began*, at least, to change all this; though with less perfect knowledge than their successors they tried with equal zeal to ascertain the actual conditions under which the books of the Bible were written.

Another great quality in their interpretation of the Bible was their willingness to let it interpret itself. They first put it, with undoubting confidence, before the people. Luther often wished that all the commentaries, including his own, would perish, so that men might have nothing to read but the plain word of God, for, said he, the Bible explains itself better than any gloss. It is notable, too, that the greatest of the Reformers was the boldest in subjecting the Bible to the test of his private reason; Martin Luther was one of the freest, as well as one of the earliest, of all higher critics.

Finally, it is plain that to the Reformers, as to all deeply spiritual Christians, the most important thing in interpreting the Bible was to get its message to their own souls. The practical and moral is the burden of their exegesis. All else was but accessory; theology was to them the science of saving souls; if it failed in that it missed everything.